

VZCZCXRO0567  
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA  
DE RUEHNK #0092/01 0291307  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 291307Z JAN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8066  
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0759

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000092

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D COPY - TEXT

DEPT FOR AF/W DENNISON, AF/RSA, DRL/AE, AND AF/PDPA LISENBY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OPRC](#) [KPAO](#) [KMDR](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

NOUAKCHOTT 00000092 001.4 OF 002

MEDIA REACTION: INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

¶1. (U) Arabic and French dailies and websites gave superb coverage to the MissionQs innaugural program which attracted more than 250 guests. However, in the weeks leading to the event, coverage of the transition itself was limited reflecting the ambiguity of the Mauritanian political/intellectual class caught in the competing demands of the current internal political crisis and anger at the Israeli offensive in Gaza. Several independent French dailies covering the Inauguration remained fixed to themes of interest to Mauritians: Iraq, Guantanamo, Gaza, the significance of Obama as the first black American president and potential foreign policy shifts towards Mauritania that Obama might usher in. In a Moslem country with historically complex racial divides, and mixing, between the equal populations of Black and White Moors and Afro Mauritians, ObamaQs story holds particular appeal, and the excitement on the street was palpable, if not fully reflected in the press. End Summary.

-----  
America is not rid of its demons  
-----

¶2. (U) Considering the heightened media attention during the election period, the lack of local coverage in the lead up to the Inauguration is puzzling. It could be due to national concern over the situation in Israel, a deflating of hopes that characterized the exciting and eminently watchable campaign season or a cooling of relations with Washington alongside the freezing of ties to Israel. Since the August 6th, 2008 coup, Washington has most consistently called for a return to constitutional order and return of democratically elected president Abdallahi while other European neighbors have participated in junta-led initiatives thereby giving tacit support.

¶3. (U) On January 19th, buried in the depths of local French papers, Nouakchott Info, L'Eveil Hebdo and La Renovateur one found coverage of the "Obama Express" train to Washington, the astronomical sales of tickets to Inaugural Day events and the "Barack the Magic Negro" satire controversy. In drawing a parallel to the racial issues that plague their country, an article in "L'Eveil Hebdo" explained that this incident "reflects the difficulty Americans have in supporting the idea of a black person at the helm...America won't be able to get rid of old demons in several months." There seemed, in part, a begrudging quality to the Inauguration coverage, local press reluctant to shed a positive light on the

United States and unwilling to share the celebratory cheer felt on the streets of urban Nouakchott and paths in rural villages.

-----  
"Obama's example is relevant for Mauritania"  
-----

¶4. (U) State run media relegated the 21st of January coverage of the Inauguration to a quarter of page 6. This was juxtaposed with the next page, a full page article on the response of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to the bombing of the UN building in Gaza on January 15th. The lack of media coverage and its apparent political rationale did not go unnoticed in the independent press. In response, an editorial in "La Renovateur" noted: "It is pathetic and worrisome to see that our press doesn't even mention, even briefly, the event of the year, the Inauguration of the first Black American President". Instead they note that the same subjects are treated ad nauseum by Nouakchott's newspapers, such as Israel, the junta's initiatives, and Iraq. Appropriating Obama's message of progress, the editorial concludes "instead of looking for what can help our country advance, we ruminate over racial and ethnic divisions, whether ideological (Baathist, Nasserist etc...) In our country, where both whites and blacks live together, only competence and merit should matter. That is where Obama's example is relevant for Mauritania." The lack of media coverage did not parallel the streets of Mauritania, where locals sporting Obama paraphernalia, t-shirts, hats and bracelets, represented a population mystified by the historic moment, and energized by the possibilities.

-----  
Q Mutual interest and Mutual respect  
-----

¶5. (U) The common themes that local press did pick up on  
NOUAKCHOTT 00000092 002.4 OF 002

following Obama's speech included race, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and relations to the Muslim world. Obama's pointed words to the Muslim world, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect" were picked up in several papers. The other words of his Inaugural speech that were oft-quoted in local press included that that Obama "is ready to lead" and "defeat extremists from around the world."

¶8. (U) Of the Embassy organized Inauguration event, papers picked up on, and copied the Charge's remarks prior to the swearing in, and his immediate reaction to Obama's speech. The panel debate that included civil society leaders was also covered by many papers. One French website, CRIDEM, noted the "absence of official representatives of the Mauritanian state" and most Arabic dailies fixated on the fact that Mauritaniens were not represented at the event. Another respected French daily chose not to cover the event at all and instead took a page on Guantanamo.

¶9. (U) Comment: In the lead up to the Inauguration, there was a general reluctance by local press to share in the continent wide euphoria of the first Black American President. There is reason for this - Washington does not recognize the junta leadership and has stopped important military and non-humanitarian assistance funding. Another reason is the timing. Dual events of the increasing death tolls of Palestinians in the Middle East, combined with the attempted return of ousted President Abdallahi, brought to light policy differences with Washington - viewed as a supporter of Israel and President Abdallahi. On January 23rd, the Department of State issued a Press release criticizing the junta's impeding the return of President Abdallahi to Nouakchott and again demanding a return to constitutional order. Both these policies have provoked violent and unprecedented protests in the streets of Nouakchott and

help explain why the Inauguration, once the biggest story, was now relegated to final pages - if not absent - in local press. However, local excitement couldn't be hidden. In the wake of the Embassy's event, the pulse of the Mauritanian people came to light in the papers with Arabic papers printing pictures of invitees with the Obama cut out and French sites showering compliments on the US Embassy for the event. Obama's election and inauguration provided post heretofore unopened channels of communication. Despite the stagnant and repetitive state the coup has engendered in local media, this transition has provided an avenue of common, new and positive discourse in a 100% Muslim and multicultural society. It remains to be seen, six months post-coup, whether the optimism engendered in the local population towards Obama can revive the press or whether it will stick to the state-run pro-junta party line.

WALSH